

SOCIAL DECODING OF SOCIAL MEDIA: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANABEL QUAN-HAASE

In this interview Professor Anabel Quan-Haase, one of the world's leading researchers of new media and technology, explains why sociological theory and sociological imagination matter in social media research. Prof. Quan-Haase raises a number of ethical questions that are often ignored but need to be addressed to make social media research more transparent, legally established, and socially acceptable. She also spells out how Big Data may contribute to understandings of online and offline social phenomena.

Anabel Quan-Haase is a Professor at the Faculty of Information and Media Studies and the Department of Sociology at the University of Western Ontario, in London, Canada. Her research and teaching focuses on the impact of technology on society, computer-mediated communication, social capital, and social networks. She is the director of the Sociodigital Lab, a research center that explores a wide range of interactions between ICTs and society, and she is past president of the Canadian Association for Information Science (CAIS). Prof. Quan-Haase is an author of several books e.g., *Information Brokering in the High-Tech Industry: Online Social Networks at Work* published by Lambert Academic Publishing in 2009, *Technology and Society: Inequality, Power, and Social Networks* published by Oxford University Press in 2012, 2016, and co-editor (with Luke Sloan) of *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, published in 2017.

This interview with Professor Anabel Quan-Haase was conducted by Kamil Filipek from the Interdisciplinary Centre for Mathematical and Computational Modelling, University of Warsaw, Poland.

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KF: To start off, is there anything interesting in the study of social media for sociologists?

AQ-H: That is a really good question. And it is not easy to answer because there are so many different kinds of social media, and I think that sociologists are attracted to different platforms and questions on different platforms for different reasons. Just to give you a few examples, I think that, for instance, when you look at something like Facebook, Facebook often represents our personal connections, so friends and family. Facebook would be of a lot of interest to sociologists because we would be, we have a glimpse, a picture of what people's social connections look like, the dynamics of those connections, to whom people are connected to, and what types of information do they exchange via any additional communication. Other platforms like Twitter, for instance, they provide a glimpse into political life, which is also an important subject of sociological

inquiry. But more generally maybe, not looking just at a specific platform and the kinds of social questions we can ask, I would say that, on the one hand, most of our social world now goes into the digital, so our social world does not only stay offline, but rather a lot of who we are, our identity, how we present ourselves, issues of symbolic interactionism, some presentations of efficacy, even things like building networks, all of those things go beyond the physical environment, so sociologists can't ignore, really, the big part that digital phenomena play in most people's everyday lives. And such, I think, it is really important for sociologist to examine these new phenomena that we have not seen before and are emerging online. Just think of the diffusion of information. Again, an important question that sociologists have grappled with for a long time. Robert K. Merton's classic work of cosmopolitanism, looks at the diffusion of information with regards to opinion leaders and gatekeepers, so, again, when you look at how information diffuses on networks like Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook a lot of those sociological theories become relevant for understanding new phenomena that we haven't seen on such scale and speed before.

KF: I know that you are examining social media from a variety of angles. What is your major area of interest in social media?

AQ-H: My work actually looks at the sociodigital, so I am really interested in both how existing social phenomena move online, but also how the digital creates new phenomena. A really good example of this is our recent study on the public sphere. Again, Habermas has discussed the public sphere and the relevance of the public sphere for democracy and for citizen engagement, for mobilization of resources, and for activism. So, we now, for instance, study how the public sphere has emerged online, so in one of the studies we did, we followed the right to be forgotten, which is a ruling by the European Court of Justice (ECoJ) and we were really interested in how the discussion about the law – the right to be forgotten – unfolded on Twitter; who are the key players, what are they discussing and our central question was how does the public sphere change when it becomes a digital public sphere. So, a lot of the research that we do is really about trying to understand how the digital has influenced phenomena that perhaps we -- as sociologists -- have already studied for a long time. How we can re-conceptualize or revisit some of those sociological theories. For instance, in the case of the study on the public sphere, we found that there was a lot of resemblance between the traditional public sphere as Habermas described it and the new public sphere. There are some changes, but overall, we still see the elites really playing the critical role in the diffusion of information, still controlling the message, so we didn't see as large engagement of the public as we would had expected to see, so I find that doing empirical work that really looks up the data itself is critical because a lot of the rhetoric that exists around social media is very utopian and positive. The way we look at the data, often the data will give you a completely different story in terms of what is really happening online. So this kind of sociology, I would refer to as real life sociology because it takes a look at what happens on these networks.

KF: It has been found in a prior research that the digital public sphere is very polarized. Did you find such polarizing effect in your research?

AQ-H: We found with regards to the right to be forgotten that the overall sentiment was very positive. There were a few negative voices within it that were critical of the implementation of the law and how the law would be actually reinforced because in this environment Google is the key, the central player, when it comes to implementing laws that are abstract, they have to be implemented at the algorithm level. So, I think that a lot of the debate that unfolded online had to

do with how do you make a law like that happen? And what are the consequences for everyday users? Because when you look for information, this information can be online, but you cannot find it, and on top of that you don't know that this information is online, but that you cannot locate it because the central entry point into the information world is filtering that out. It has a lot of implications for how we experience the digital world and what information we can find and who controls what information we can find and how we find it.

KF: The history of social theory is long and rich. Some theories have lost their attractiveness, while others remain widely accepted and applied. Do you think sociological theory remains useful in the context of social media research?

AQ-H: I think that sociological theory is at heart of any study of social media. I think that, for instance, conflict theory based on neo-Marxist approaches would be critical. A lot of the work that I do looks at the digital divide, so I try to understand which social groups are connected and which are not connected, and I think that it goes to the heart of issues of inequality. So, if a lot of information today is online and there is a group of people who either is not online, or doesn't have the digital skills to use digital technology, it doesn't have the digital literacy to engage critically with digital content, then there will be a problem because it will create new inequalities. So, to me, conflict theory is a relevant approach to understanding what are those social groups that are disconnected, for example: seniors, people in low-income brackets, people at the fringes of society. For instance, a central sociological theory is symbolic interactionism. And a lot of what happens in social media is about either dyadic or small group interaction, so symbolic interactionism has a lot to contribute in terms of understanding interactions digitally, both on a small scale and also on a large scale. The methods that I use rely on social network analysis, which of course developed from Simmel's work on the web of affiliations. So, I feel that this theory has really influenced even how we see the web, how we see the Internet as an interconnection of nodes – that is a part of sociological work that we do. We want to understand how people are connected and how the position they occupy within larger social structures influences their ability to access specific resources. Something that I know is really critical to my own work, so symbolic interactionism has a lot to contribute. Yet another theory is feminism. I mean, feminism is not only about differences between men and women and how they create inequalities, but feminism is really about looking at intersectionality, so how is it that different groups like black women or myself – I am a Latino woman – how is it that online again those inequalities play out? How do they influence what we post and how we interact? How are our voices heard? So sociology has a lot to contribute to how we understand both how people interact with others, but also the larger structures that are forming online and the power imbalances they create.

KF: Critical analysts claim that social media are profit-driven commercial models. Thus, shall we put so much attention to social media, if we know that they are driven by money and profit?

AQ-H: Well, I think that you're right. Absolutely. Even analyzing that, like Christian Fuchs's work on Google, for instance, on the political economy of information is critical sociological work that looks at issues of inequality, power imbalances, uncovering how information flows, how resources flow, where capital is today – to me, it is really important to understanding the web itself, but also society at large.

KF: In January of 2017 SAGE Publishing announced a new book, the *Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, you co-edited this with Luke Sloan. Could you tell us more about this book?

AQ-H: In the *Handbook of Social Media Research Methods* we've tried to cover a wide range of methods, so we include quantitative approaches as well as qualitative approaches and mixed methods approaches, bringing together over 50 authors from a wide range of disciplines and scholarly traditions. The *Handbook* is an important step toward sharing novel methodologies, tools and techniques specifically geared toward taking full advantage of the unique characteristics of social media data. The amount, scale and scope of social media data have created a need for methodological innovations that are uniquely suited to examine social media data. The *Handbook* aids in navigating what tools are available to researchers for the purpose of social media data collection, analysis, and representation. Clearly different tools are best suited for sound, video, textual, and visual. One of our most central arguments in the book is that central to any social media project is the formulation of a sound research design, this will allow a scholar to produce meaningful insights. And a part of it is, of course, the method has to be tailored to the research question, something we all learn in our methods classes. So I think the kind of question that social media researchers can ask are very diverse, as we saw they can come from different sociological approaches; from conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, feminism, structuralism, so I think that different kinds of methods are appropriate for different kinds of questions. But what we saw in the book was that sometimes traditional methods can be used in novel ways to study new media, for instance, you can do interviews with users of Twitter or Facebook, if you want to know about their experiences, attitudes, opinions, or you can also gather larger amounts of data through quantitative methodology. If you want to look more at the structure of the networks as they develop online over time. Mixed methods are effective if you are not only interested in the larger picture of mobile networks and their structural features, but also in what are people thinking about their interactions, what does it mean when they post a message. So I think that there are different kinds of methods that are appropriate for different kinds of questions. But we saw throughout the book that similar concerns were being raised by authors; things related to ethics, how do we manage social media projects, what kind of data can we collect, how can we store the data, how do we treat people that have generated content? Can you use that content? Do we need permission first to use that content? Do we anonymize the data? So, as you can see, any social media project happens at a wide range of dimensions – from the conception to ethical considerations, to data management issues, to methods of analysis that are open to interpretation.

KF: Some scholars suggest that Big Data will profoundly change our understanding of society. Indeed, the big data revolution is ongoing, it is very loud, and I think a little overblown. How could sociologists benefit from the big data revolution?

AQ-H: Not all of my studies are big data studies, we often interview people to learn about their experiences with social media. For me, there is a space for big data analytics because there are some questions that can only be answered through collecting a lot of real-time data, but context is often also really critical to gain understandings. So we can't have only studies that draw on Big Data. All data is created in a social space, and that social space has meaning. In the *Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, Luke and I saw many innovative approaches that were based on qualitative work, such as narrative analysis, visual analysis, and data thickening. Every tweet

comes out of a social context, so I think that as sociologists we not only embrace big data analytics blindly, but consider its possibilities and limitations to provide answers to key research questions. So, for me there is no single approach, rather it depends on the study and context of the research. It is about choosing a research carefully, one that can provide meaningful insights and is relevant to society, rather than letting the data drive the project. It is about formulating questions that have social relevance, that's what we do as sociologists best, we study things that are critical to society, like inequality, like social groups, which others ignore, they are invisible. So I think that if we move to big data with those sensibilities in mind, as a sociologist we can contribute to understanding social phenomena that happens online as well as the intersection of the issues that are critical to society and how they can be represented and linked to social media data.

KF: Thank you very much for your time.

AQ-H: Thank you. It has been a real pleasure.

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